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## CHAPTER 6

## The Genevan Churches and the Western Church\*

Jon Balserak

Briefly to conclude this part of our subject: We are in search of the Church of God. We all admit it to have been so propagated from the beginning as to have continued through an uninterrupted series of ages down to our day and to be diffused at present over the whole world.<sup>1</sup>

These words, from John Calvin's *The True Method of bringing Peace and Reformation to the Church*, cannot but seem surprising to the modern reader. How can Calvin, writing in the spring of 1549 from within Christian Europe, speak as if the church were a mysterious entity for which everyone was searching? The beginnings of an answer appear in Calvin's

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<sup>1</sup> CO 7: 612. *Vera Christianae pacificationis et ecclesiae reformandae ratio*. ET: *Tracts & Letters* 3: 266. Unless otherwise specified all translations are my own.

rephrasing: “There remains another question: Is it tied to persons (*personis alligata*)?”<sup>2</sup> Here “persons” is for all intents and purposes a euphemism for the Roman Catholic Church. Calvin wishes to insinuate that the church is not, in fact, tied to the ‘papists.’ They claim to be the true church, but are not. He distinguishes between the catholic church and the Roman Church, just as Luther had done earlier. Elaborating, Calvin notes that, even long ago, Hilary († ca.367) said the Church “rather lurked in caverns than shone conspicuously in primary sees.”<sup>3</sup> This position is characteristic of the Genevans. Calvin, Theodore Beza and all who were part of the Venerable Company of Pastors held that the Church is not to be assumed simply to be that body who effusively insist that they, and no one else, are the church. Intriguingly, the words quoted at the top of this chapter come from a plea Calvin wrote for ecclesiastical peace. He intended the treatise as a balm to a European church that had been haemorrhaging for the last thirty years due to disputes initiated by Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and others.

Calvin goes on here and in other written and oral communications to elaborate on this search for the church of God. He insists vehemently that “evangelicals,” which was how he and other of his colleagues tended to identify themselves, were, in fact, the true church of God and were not guilty of the sin of “schism,” which is the sin of separating oneself from the church (1 Cor. 12:25-27; Eph. 4:1-6; the Roman Catholics labelled evangelicals as schismatics). Given the crucial importance of the question of schism and the associated

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<sup>2</sup> CO 7: 612.

<sup>3</sup> CO 7: 612.

matter of the identity of the Genevan Church as true church, this chapter will focus on these matters.<sup>4</sup>

*The Church and the Doctrine of the Church in Western Christendom*

The development of the doctrine of the church in the west is profoundly indebted to patricians: Cyprian, Augustine, Vincent of Lérins. The Middle Ages witnessed additions, alterations, and refinements to that doctrine, particularly during the late Middle Ages when the subject moved from the domain of the canon lawyers to that of theologians.

Thinking on the church—and, in fact, the relative importance of it to a given period—would ebb and flow for the centuries between the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and Joan of Arc's death (†1431). For instance, Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologicae* contains no material on ecclesiology, while Jan Hus would write a large tome, *The Church (De Ecclesia)*, dedicated to the locus 200 years later (published in 1415) in which he set down an important reading indebted primarily to John Wyclif and of course to Augustine. Deeply influenced by the Avignon papacy, the Renaissance, the growth and spread of apocalyptic thought, and the

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<sup>4</sup> Alexandre Ganoczy, *Le jeune Calvin: genèse et évolution de sa vocation réformatrice* (Wiesbaden: 1966), 304-335; Benjamin Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden: 1970); Timothy George (ed.), *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform* (Louisville, KY: 1990); Herman Speelman, *Calvin and the Independence of the Church*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Göttingen: 2014). Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, 5 vols. (Chicago: 1984), 4: 69-126. I have reflected earlier on schism in Jon Balserak, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France; Calvin's Lectures on the Minor Prophets, 1556-1559* (Brill's Series in Church History) 50 (Leiden: 2011), 19-64.

arrival in Europe of the ‘Turks,’ writings on the church by Hus and others stoked suspicion about the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. Particularly significant here was the rise of the belief—fuelled to some degree by fourteenth-century disputes within the Franciscan Order<sup>5</sup>—that the Pope was the Anti-Christ, the Man of Perdition; and the Roman Church was the Whore of Babylon, Synagogue of Satan, and suchlike. Raised within this context, Luther, Zwingli, and other Protestant Reformers began pressing more vigorously for doctrinal changes within Christendom while also viciously attacking the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See *inter alia*, Ian Christopher Levy, “Wycliffites, Franciscan Poverty, and the Apocalypse” *Franciscan Studies* 73 (2015): 295-316. For a superb analysis of the Anti-Christ, see Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: 1999).

<sup>6</sup> A collection of scholarly analyses can be taken up to examine the developments of the period; e.g. Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility, 1150–1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty, and Tradition in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: 1972); Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: 1994). More broadly, see a number of pieces in the companion to the Great Western Schism; in particular, Christopher Bellitto, “The Reform Context of the Great Western Schism,” in *A Companion to the Great Western Schism (1378–1417)*, eds. Joëlle Rollo-Koster and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden and Boston: 2009), 303-32. The chapter by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, “The Conceptualization and Imagery of the Great Schism” in *A Companion to the Great Western Schism*, 123-58 delves into the Anti-Christ with respect to the late middle ages, mentioning, for instance, *Vaticinia de Summis Pontificibus* (Venice: 1589). She takes up these issues in more detail Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Poets, Saints, and Visionaries of the Great Schism, 1378-1417* (University Park, PA: 2006).

These enthusiastic attacks met with serious engagement from seasoned Catholic polemicists like Johannes Cochlaeus and Johan Eck, forcing later evangelicals such as Guillaume Farel, John Calvin, and Theodore Beza to reframe and reassert their positions for a new generation of Europeans following the death of Ulrich Zwingli (†1531), Johannes Oecolampadius (†1531) and the waning powers of Wolfgang Capito (†1541) and of course Martin Luther (†1546).

In the case of Geneva, the Reformation came to a city which, being relatively small, was grappling with its own independence while seeking stable relations with neighboring cities like Berne. Meanwhile, a significant portion of Geneva's attention faced westward towards France from which not only its ministers but also a growing number of its population came. As "Lutheranism" (as evangelical ideas were often called) spread through Catholic France in the 1530s, 1540s and 1550s, many fled persecution and made their way to Geneva.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the leaders of the Genevan Church—which for the period I am going to cover includes primarily Guillaume Farel, John Calvin, Pierre Viret, and Theodore Beza—inherited a series of complex relationships with the civil authorities of Geneva (principally the Little Council (*Petit Conseil*)) and the other bodies, not to mention powerful families within Geneva, theologians from nearby Swiss cities, and suchlike. These ministers self-professed love for the Christian Church ordered and focused their handling of the delicate situation within which they found themselves, though not in ways that would suit everyone.

By comparison with their neighbors, Geneva was late to decide for the Reformation. Reforming efforts began in Zurich in 1519 and by the 1520s were in full-swing. Likewise, Berne had become evangelical by early 1528. But reform did not start in Geneva, despite the

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Geneva's relationship with nearby cities and with France, see the chapters by William Naphy, Peter Opitz, and Mathieu Caesar in this volume.

pressure from Berne, until 1532 when Farel settled in the city. He was joined by Pierre Viret, who was sent to Geneva by the Berne city council, in 1534. A disputation held in Geneva, after the fashion of those held in Zurich and Berne, moved Geneva closer towards acceptance of the evangelical gospel, and by 1535 they had abolished the Catholic mass. Calvin's arrival in August 1536 would strengthen the implementing of changes to the Genevan Church, as would the later arrival of Beza first in 1548 and then permanently in 1558.<sup>8</sup>

As other chapters in this volume are dealing with worship and liturgy, preaching, organization, and other practical aspects of the Genevan Church, the material found below will focus on theological aspects of the locus. Within the broad theme of schism, this chapter will treat three issues: (1) the Genevan Church's relationship to the historic Christian Church and, specifically, the Roman Catholic Church vis-à-vis the charge of schism; (2) Geneva's belief in the priority of scriptural over ecclesiastical authority and the usefulness of this as a defence against the charge; and (3) a brief discussion of the Genevan Church's relationship to the ecumenical creeds and councils.

### *The Genevan Church and the Problem of Schism*

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<sup>8</sup> For coverage on Geneva, Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed* (New Haven and London: 2002); Jonathan Reid, "French Evangelical Networks Before 1555: Proto-Churches?," in *La réforme en France et en Italie: Contacts, comparaisons, et contrastes*, eds. Philip Benedict, et al. (Rome: 2007) 105–24; for older but still excellent research, see Pierre Imbart de la Tour, *Les Origines de la Réforme*, 4 vols. (Paris: 1905–1935) 4: 185–93; Émile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 7 vols. (Lausanne: 1844–1937), 3: 594–647.

Writings focused specifically on the nature of the Christian church by Geneva's leadership included works by Farel, Viret, and Beza, but the theological heavy-lifting was undoubtedly done by Calvin, whose seminal efforts were of marked significance for Genevan and Reformed thought. Here a (selective) commitment to Augustinian orthodoxy guided and shaped the Frenchman. Calvin's handling of the topic included common themes: the motherhood of the church, the church as the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ, and suchlike. But ever-present in the background of Calvin's handling of ecclesiology was the issue of schism.

Augustine developed his thought on schism, fighting against the Donatists in works like *On Baptism against the Donatists* and *On the Unity of the Church*.<sup>9</sup> The positions articulated in these writings would profoundly shape the Genevans, and Calvin. Yet Calvin's defence of the Genevan Church against the charge of schism, while dependent on Augustine in various ways, exhibited idiosyncrasies.

Like Augustine, Calvin understood the church to be a mixed body (*permixta ecclesia*), based on the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13: 24-29), and was profoundly conscious of the implications of this position, particularly given the presence of Anabaptist and Radical contemporaries and their renewal of a Montanist/Donatist conception of the 'pure' church. In writings on the church and church-related matters from *An Exhortation to the Invincible Caesar*<sup>10</sup> to, of course, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin articulated unambiguously his belief that the church is full of sinners; that the greatest threat to the

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<sup>9</sup> Literature on Augustine's view on the church is sizeable; see, *inter alia*, Pasquale Borgomeo, *L'Église de ce temps dans la prédication de saint Augustin* (Paris: 1972).

<sup>10</sup> *Supplex exhortatio ad invictissimum Caesarem, Admonitio paterna Pauli III. Romani pontificis ad invictissimum* (CO 6: 453-534).



church is not from pagans, Jews, Turks, or heretics, but from those in the church who have set their hearts on something other than God. His sermons and many of his treatises are replete with such warnings. Thus, he regarded many of the Anabaptists who sought to establish (what they believed was) a pure Church to be schismatics.

But this seems to put Calvin in an extremely-difficult position. If he believed in the mixed character of the church, one might wonder what could have prompted his decision to separate from the Roman Catholic Church. If the Catholic Church was sinful, was that not simply proof of its mixed character? Would it not, therefore, be *ipso facto* an act of schism to separate from it? Or was there a point at which the mixture tips towards corruption to an unacceptable level? These and other queries will be taken up as we proceed.

In assessing the development of redemptive history vis-à-vis the Church, Calvin did *not* argue that the Christian church had become so corrupt that it had disappeared entirely from the world on some specific date, such as after the Council of Ephesus (325) or another early date, as many of the Radicals had done.<sup>11</sup> Rather, Calvin insisted that despite the weakness and spiritual depravity which plagued the Christian Church throughout her history, she never ceased to exist:

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<sup>11</sup> On such see, R. Emmet McLaughlin, “Spiritualism: Schwenckfeld and Franck and their Early Modern Resonances,” in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521–1700*, eds. John Roth and James Stayer (Leiden: 2006), 119-161, especially 135-36; more generally, Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: 1998).

That there is a universal Church that has existed from the beginning of the world, and will be even to the end, we all acknowledge. The appearance by which it is able to be recognised is the real question.<sup>12</sup>

It is here, with the sentiment found in this final sentence, that Calvin sets out his stall and, in the process, arguably distinguishes himself from someone like Augustine (more on Calvin's relationship with Augustine on this specific point later).

So, the church has always, and will always, exist on earth. The problem is locating it. Here Calvin and his colleagues, adopting a late-medieval emphasis which was also found in the writings of numerous Swiss (particularly Zurich) theologians, insisted that the true church was not always visible or observable. Articulating this position, Calvin takes issue with the Roman Catholics: "Our controversy turns on these hinges: first, they contend that the form of the church (*ecclesiae formam*) is always apparent and observable. Secondly, they set this form in the see of the Roman Church and its hierarchy."<sup>13</sup> Calvin, as we say, disagreed with both points, but particularly, for our purposes right now, the first.

What he means by the idea that the Church is not always observable ought to be clarified. He explains it in a response he wrote (which he entitled, *Antidote*) to a theological statement published by the theological faculty of the University of Paris. There he states that the Church is not always discernible and that various periods of redemptive history testify to this. "In the time of the prophets," he argues, "the multitude of the wicked so prevailed that the true church was oppressed" and essentially sent into hiding. He also mentions "the time of Christ," during which time "we see that the little flock of God was hidden from people, while

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<sup>12</sup> CO 7: 30.

<sup>13</sup> From Calvin's preface to Francis I (CO 1: 20).

the ungodly usurped to themselves the name of Church.” After elaborating on this theme a moment longer, Calvin concludes by saying these incidents offer “proof that the Church of God may likewise be concealed from us, especially since we know from the prophecy of Paul that such a defection was predicted (2 Thes. 2: 3).”<sup>14</sup>

This explanation capped with the note about Paul’s prophecy illustrates that Calvin does not have in mind invisibility, as such. He was not, in other words, asserting the church is undetectable; i.e. that it is literally invisible, exhibiting no trace of its existence or presence. In fact, he nearly always follows discussion of the *hidden* character of the church with treatment of the ways the true Church *can* be found, so that a believer can know where she ought to worship; we will discuss these ways momentarily. So, he has something in mind other than sheer invisibility. Rather, Calvin is claiming that the true Church of God often had its place usurped by corrupt pretenders who wield more power and worldly influence with which they persecute true believers forcing them into hiding; that the true Church exhibited qualities regarded as unusual and unappealing: smallness, weakness, poverty, and such like, and that for this reason it was often not recognized as the true Church. For Calvin and many in his day this notion of un-observability was essential to understanding rightly the true character of the Christian Church on earth and particularly during his own era.

It was, in fact, through the prophetic writings in particular, as through a lens, that numerous Genevan and Zurich theologians assessed the Church of their day. Reflecting on the prophets, Calvin asks: “what form do we think it displayed when Elijah complained that he alone was left?”<sup>15</sup> The reference to Elijah is, of course, to 1 Kings 19: 18 and God’s word to the prophet concerning the 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. To Calvin and many

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<sup>14</sup> CO 7: 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> CO 1: 21.

others, Elijah became simultaneously a brilliant lesson on the church's true nature and a foil employed polemically against Rome. They held that this period was particularly dark. Calvin, in fact, could speak as if the Church had come so close to destruction that it were as if it had vanished.

In the time of Elijah there was such a desolation that there remained no appearance of a church (*nullus iam superesset ecclesiae conspectus*), and yet, though no vestige of God's grace appeared, the Church of God was, as it were, hid in the grave, and was wonderfully preserved.<sup>16</sup>

This period in history persuasively demonstrated, Calvin believed, that the essential form of the church could not be regarded as visible or observable—because, it wasn't; Elijah could not easily see it; all he saw was a large corrupt body which claimed to be the church but which he knew was idolatrous and had turned away from God (All this presupposes the strongly Augustinian and covenantal understanding of the church existing across the two testaments, beginning with Adam and Eve—this, for Farel, Calvin, and Beza, would have been a non-negotiable. The church exists in covenant relationship to God, first established with Adam in Gen. 3: 15. What the Old and New testaments represent is two administrations of the one covenant that is, essentially, spiritual).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> CO 49: 213 as cited in Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> This is so despite Calvin's unusual interpretation of Genesis 3: 15 in his commentary and sermon. But we know Calvin believed, "Adam and Eve, with a few other of their children, were themselves true worshippers of God ..." (CO 23: 103; on Gen. 4:25) as cited by Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, 8. For the best analysis of Calvin/Calvinist views of the

In fact, what one sees, Calvin and others argue, in the story of Elijah is a basic differentiation between the true and false church. In other words, one sees the church as large corrupt body (Israel governed by Ahab and Jezebel) and the church as tiny remnant of the pious (Elijah and the 7000). Again, this distinction has precedence in Luther's thought and elsewhere, and finds brilliant expression, Calvin believed, in the story of Elijah at Horeb. The distinction is reflected in the title of Calvin's 1559 edition of the *Institutes* 4.2, where the Frenchman speaks of a comparison between "the true and false church (*falsae ecclesiae ... vera*)."<sup>18</sup> Likewise, his lectures on the prophets are replete with discussion of the corrupt church and its persecution of the remnant of the faithful, making regular allusion to the large corrupt body (the Roman Church) and the tiny pious remnant (the Calvinist/Reformed).<sup>19</sup>

While some may suggest that Calvin, in asserting this distinction, had effectively jettisoned the Augustinian notion of the mixed church for something that appears more like a pure-church-within-a-corrupt-church model, I would argue such a complaint is inaccurate. Calvin, Beza, and the Genevan pastors still acknowledged that every one of the Calvinist churches in Geneva, France, the Netherlands and elsewhere represented a mixed body, containing both believers and sinners. This distinction does nothing to attack the mixed-church doctrine. What the distinction allows him to do, though, is identify and speak about the Calvinist 'remnant' churches vis-à-vis the Roman church in a manner that Calvin feels is historically accurate and also illumines their 16th-century circumstances.

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covenant, see the writings of Donald MacLeod, <https://donaldmacleod.org.uk/dm/covenant-theology/>.

<sup>18</sup> CO 2: 767 (Inst 4. 2).

<sup>19</sup> See Balserak, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France*, 181-210; id., *John Calvin as Sixteenth-Century Prophet* (Oxford: 2014), 66-101, 130-142.

Calvin and the Genevans saw themselves as a continuation of Elijah's remnant of 7000 who did not bow the knee. They self-identified deeply with this biblical notion, speaking in correspondences to French Calvinist conventicles and to the broader Reformed community throughout the Swiss Territories and elsewhere of the persecution they faced as pious bands of believers dwelling under the shadow of the corrupt Romanist church, who falsely claimed the name of church.<sup>20</sup> This understanding provides us with a useful point upon which to build and pursue a deeper understanding of Calvin's defence against the charge of schism.

### *Separation is not Schism*

The difficulty to which we pointed earlier is still unresolved. Does any of what we have been considered up to this point justify *separation from* the Roman Catholic Church? In Calvin's mind, it does. This raises a question as to precisely how he views the Roman Catholic Church and we shall take up that question in due course.

Calvin insists that the Genevan Churches are right to extract themselves from Romanism. In fact, their separation from Rome is *not* a separation from the Body of Christ, but is part of a move to reunite themselves with Christ's Body on earth. He wrote, as early as 1539:

Wherefore, in declining fatal participation in such wickedness, we run no risk of being dissevered from the Church of Christ. The communion of the Church was not

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<sup>20</sup> See Max Engammare, "Une certaine idee de la France chez Jean Calvin l'exile," *Societe de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Francais* 155 (2009): 15-27.

instituted to be a chain to bind us in idolatry, impiety, ignorance of God, and other kinds of evil, but rather to retain us in the fear of God and obedience of the truth.<sup>21</sup>

Simply put: Calvin and his Genevan co-religionists were not guilty of schism, but, in fact, the Roman Catholic Church were guilty of it. They, as an institution, had severed themselves from Christ's Body.<sup>22</sup>

What, in Calvin's judgement, was the specific nature of the declension in which the Roman Catholic Church were involved? As we saw earlier, Calvin did not argue that the Christian Church ever ceased completely to exist on earth. He did argue, however, that there were periods during which it was difficult to detect (remembering that Calvin and others distinguish between the catholic church and the Roman church). Examining the history and character of the church in various places, Calvin is never specific on *precisely* when the declension he saw in the Roman Catholic Church occurred, though he does make it clear that there was not a single 'fall' of the Roman church but rather a progression towards deepening corruption. Calvin declares that as early as Bernard of Clairvaux (†1153)—whom Calvin and many others saw as a light shining in a dark time—Rome had profaned "all things sacred."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Strasbourg: 1539), 133 as cited in Balserak, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Regarding his own day, Calvin aligns the pope with the Anti-Christ, as did so many of his contemporaries; CO 5: 393 (*Reply to Cardinal Sadolet*); CO 6: 472–73 *et passim* (*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*). Scholarship looking at Calvin on the Antichrist, Heinrich Berger, *Calvins Geschichtsauffassung* (Zurich: 1955), 73–92.

<sup>23</sup> CO 2: 836–37; Inst. 4.7.18. He, like many of his colleagues, viewed the early church as a golden age, see his *Reply to Sadolet* (CO 5: 394).

Even during the time of Gregory I (†604) he believed problems were mounting. Calvin also singles out the rise of the papacy and (later) of scholasticism for special mention. This did not, as I have said, mean the Church on earth had disappeared, but that the Roman church had fallen into profoundly serious decline. But Calvin insists there was always a remnant of true believers that remained faithful.<sup>24</sup>

This, obviously, was not how the Roman Catholic Church saw things. So, Calvin complained on one occasion that the Roman Catholics “treat us as persons guilty of schism and heresy because we preach a doctrine unlike theirs, do not obey their laws, and hold our separate assemblies for prayers, baptism and the celebration of the Supper, and other holy activities.”<sup>25</sup> But Calvin was clear in his explanation of what he held to be true of the Genevan Church. His explanation was that true communion must be based on God’s word.<sup>26</sup> This true communion characterized, he believed, the Genevan churches. On doctrines essential to true Christianity, particularly having to do with worship and soteriology, the Roman church had departed from God’s word, falling outside of the boundaries within which true communion could be enjoyed.

In explaining more fully the problem with Rome which required that true believers separate from them, Calvin as well as Farel, Beza, Viret, and many other Genevan theologians pointed to the Catholic mass and idolatry.<sup>27</sup> A Christian must not, they were

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<sup>24</sup> For some discussion, Jon Balserak, “The Authority of Scripture and Tradition in Calvin’s Lectures on the Prophets,” in *The Search for Authority in the European Reformation*, eds. Peter Webster, Elaine Fulton and Helen Parish (Aldershot, Surrey: 2014), 29-48.

<sup>25</sup> CO 1: 556.

<sup>26</sup> CO 1: 556.

<sup>27</sup> CO 1: 556-57.



absolutely persuaded, ever countenance idolatry. They were adamant, moreover, that Elijah and the other prophets did not take part in the idolatry of those who worshipped Baal or worshipped in the centres established by King Jeroboam in the northern cities of Dan and Bethel. Thus, the Genevans were merely following their example.

It should be clear now that, in Calvin's assessment, the Roman church of Calvin's day were like the Old Testament Jews who fell into idolatry. As Calvin elaborated on this, he raised the important question: did no trace of the church remain among the Jewish people after they fell into idolatry? Has no trace of the church remained in Roman Catholicism? To answer this (what is essentially one question), Calvin had to address the covenant and Roman Catholicism's relation to it.

*Grades of Defection: is Rome still a Church?*

The covenant made things difficult for Calvin because it seemed to imply *prima facie* that God would never withdraw Godself from those with whom God had covenanted. How could this be true and yet the Roman Church not be a church *in some way*? And, if it were a church in some way, then should the Genevans separate from the Roman Catholics?

In adjudicating the matter, Calvin argued that there are degrees of declension (*defectionis gradus*). Israel lapsed more severely, Calvin contended, than did Judah. And the "papists" are (he said) like Israel; indeed, he explained, they are worse than Israel.<sup>28</sup> Elaborating, Calvin pursues an analysis which is based on a distinction in terms of what is meant by 'church.' This enables him to explore in a fairly-precise manner whether the Roman Catholic Church is deserving of honor from the Genevans. He argues that if one has in mind the church as a body whose judgments should be revered, warnings followed, etc, then—

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<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, 148 (for the 1559 edition, see Inst. 4.2.8).

Calvin contends—the Roman fellowship are not a church but, rather, are “profane conventicles against which the prophets cried out.”<sup>29</sup> We will, he therefore contended, grant to Rome what the prophets granted to the Jews and Israelites of their day when similar conditions prevailed. So, when the Jews and Israelites were at their worst, then—Calvin insisted—the prophets withdrew from them.

There did remain, however, certain special prerogatives of the church which were still attached to the Lord’s covenant with them. This (covenant) meant two things: *first*, the baptism of the Roman Catholic church is still legitimate and accepted by all Reformed communities (i.e. the Genevans are not Donatists but are Augustinian in their view of the sacrament); and *second*, there are some of the elect still found within their midst.<sup>30</sup> Yet if, on these grounds, anyone wanted to recognize the idolatrous Roman Catholic Church as congregations with which we ought to have communion, they are in error.

In sum, when we do not wish simply to concede the title of church to the papists, we do not for this reason refuse to concede the existence of churches among them. We only dispute concerning the true and legitimate organization of the church (*vera et legitima ecclesiae constitutione*). Antichrist reigns in the Roman church but has not wiped out the church. Thus, we by no means deny that the churches under his tyranny remain churches.<sup>31</sup>

So, Calvin made this small concession to Rome.

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<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, 148 (for the 1559 edition, see Inst. 4.2.8).

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, 148 (again, see Inst. 4.2.8).

<sup>31</sup> CO 1: 560.

He adheres to his distinction consistently when discussing the Roman Catholic Church, articulating it with varying degrees of sophistication depending on his audience. When writing in the *Institutes*, for example, we find him setting out the more nuanced picture we have been discussing. But such nuance, while fitting for a tome like the *Institutes*, could never do for the pulpit. Accordingly, Calvin could be found, quite often in fact, saying from the pulpit simply that the Roman Catholic Church was not a church. In sermons from 1550 on Acts 2, he provides a good example. In a sermon on Acts 2: 41-42 preached on 26 January 1550, Calvin declared:

Now that we have determined that the church does not exist in the Papacy, let us look straight at ourselves and see how and when we have a church.<sup>32</sup>

A short paragraph later, he declared: “It is true the pope’s church looks like the church, but if you take a good look at it, you will find nothing founded on the word of God.” Likewise: “We also said there is no church in the papacy because they do not have the word of God. When they reproach us for being separated from the church, it is a great consolation for us that we know otherwise.”<sup>33</sup>

That Calvin felt it right to speak more plainly to those attending sermons in St Pierre Cathedral is, it seems, understandable. His hearers were not only a mix of educated and uneducated individuals but, particularly by the 1540s and into the 1550s, were often Frenchmen and women who had come to Geneva precisely because they wanted to worship purely and to get away from (what they saw as) Catholic idolatry.

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<sup>32</sup> SC 8: 43.

<sup>33</sup> SC 8: 43; 8: 46.

However, for evangelicals outside of Geneva, and particularly those living in France, Calvin's subtle distinction sometimes aroused frustration. He encountered complaints such as:

Must we so strictly shun our opponents' church (*ecclesiam alienorum*), which nonetheless you all admit in your writings is a church in some sense (*esse aliquam*), that we cannot attend their services, most of all the mass, without defiling ourselves with plain, naked idolatry—which must not be done even to save one's life?<sup>34</sup>

The author of this complaint was a Frenchman whose problems with Calvin had to do, it must be said, with several things, not merely the apparent doctrinal confusion he mentions. His frustration also concerned the extremely-harsh manner in which Calvin wrote to him and the others concerning Christian worship.<sup>35</sup> In various correspondences with these Frenchmen and women, Calvin demanded they refrain from attending an “idolatrous” Catholic mass, even if it meant emigrating to another country with small children or frail, aging parents. The complaint, therefore, raises issues that cannot be addressed in a short chapter like this one, but serves, nonetheless, to highlight how Calvin attempted to set out the Genevan understanding of the Roman Catholic Church to those outside Geneva.

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<sup>34</sup> CO 11: 828.

<sup>35</sup> See, D. F. Wright, Wright, “Why was Calvin so Severe a Critic of Nicodemism?” in *Calvinus Evangelii Propugnator; Calvin, Champion of the Gospel; Papers from the International Congress on Calvin Research Seoul, 1998*, eds. David F. Wright, Anthony N.S. Lane, and Jon Balserak (Grand Rapids: 2006), 66-90.

*Recognizing the True Church by its Marks*

One might feel justified, at this point, in asking how it is that we may recognize a true Church of God. This raises the oft-discussed topic of the marks of the church. Here we are not referring to the assertion in the creeds that the church is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” Rather so far as Calvin and the Genevan pastors (with variations being apparent in the thought of Beza) were concerned, there are two<sup>36</sup> marks or signs by which one can recognize a Church: the preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.

Concerning the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin argues the marks or notes indicating the existence of a true church were “erased (*deletae sunt*)” which means “that every one of their congregations lacks the legitimate form of the church (*legitima ecclesiae forma*).”<sup>37</sup> They do not preach the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, but require human works and merit. As regards the sacraments, the Genevans’s complaints against the ‘papists’ focus primarily on the Lord’s Supper; though Calvin does criticize Roman Catholic baptisms on occasion:<sup>38</sup> “We know that baptism in the papacy has been corrupted by many base elements and almost adulterated.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The temptation to believe there was a third mark, namely Church discipline, was discarded by Calvin; others, such as Beza, toyed with different conceptions of the marks of the church, see Tadataka Maruyama, *The Ecclesiology of Theodore Beza: The Reform of the True Church* (Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance) 166 (Geneva: 1978).

<sup>37</sup> CO 1: 560.

<sup>38</sup> See, *inter alia*, CO 7: 680-82.

<sup>39</sup> CO 10a: 230; ET: John Calvin, *Calvin’s Ecclesiastical Advice*, trans. Mary Beaty and Benjamin W. Farley (Louisville, KY: 1991), 118.

By contrast, the Genevan Churches preached the true gospel and administered baptism and the Lord's Supper according to the pattern established by the Lord Jesus and set down in the scriptures. Though it seemed appealing to regard discipline as a third mark of the church, Calvin did not. He did, though, view discipline as arising out of the Church's ministry and as essential to the spiritual health of a church.

*Geneva's Justification for Breaking Away from Roman Catholicism; Calvin and Augustine*

A regular criticism levelled against not only Calvin but also other Protestants is that whatever claims they make in their polemic against the Roman Catholic Church, they all fail due to the simple facts of history: Jesus Christ gave his Spirit to his small group of disciples, who were the first Christian Church the growth of which is recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus called Saul of Tarsus, who planted churches throughout the Roman Empire. Those churches continue today under the name and government of the Roman See. To put it more plainly: the church preceded everything else, and in particular, it preceded the writing of the New Testament for which reason it has authority over the New Testament and its interpretation.

This line of argument, in fact, appears to have been employed not just by anyone but by Augustine, favorite of Calvin and others. Augustine, during part of his life, had been a Manichean (the Manicheans were a sect broadly described as a dualistic religion founded by Mani, who was from what is today, Iran). Having left the sect later, Augustine wrote a number of works against it, one of which took the form of a dialogue. It was entitled: *Against the Letter of Manichaeus called Fundamental*, and in it, he carries on a dialogue with a representative Manichean. At one point in this dialogue, Augustine declares:

But should you meet with a person not yet believing the gospel, how would you reply to him were he to say, I do not believe?

Augustine's opponent here wishes to persuade Augustine that Mani's letter called "Fundamental" is divinely inspired. Augustine asks the above question as part of his explanation as to why he refuses to believe Mani's letter is divinely inspired. Explaining this further, Augustine declared:

For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the catholic church.<sup>40</sup>

Irrespective of how the Manichean might have responded, Augustine's declaration would seem to present difficulties for Calvin and the Genevans—indeed, problems with the line of argument this chapter has been rehearsing. Calvin is certainly aware of the Augustinian declaration and sets out a particular reading of it. Examining that reading will help us understand how Calvin and the Genevans defended themselves in breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church and establishing the Genevan churches and provide us with a deeper sense of their understanding of the church.

In *Against the Letter of Manichaeus*, Augustine appears to argue that he does not believe that Mani was a disciple of Jesus Christ and thus he (Augustine) cannot possibly contemplate separating from the Catholic Church to join Mani; i.e. to return to Manichaeism. He argues, furthermore, that the only way he could be persuaded to believe 'truths' concerning Mani would be if the Catholic Church herself told Augustine to do so. Thus, it

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<sup>40</sup> "Ego vero Evangelio non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas"

PL 42: 176; NPNF 1-4: 131. (Latin title: *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti*).

would appear *prima facie* (and this is the common Roman Catholic reading of this Augustinian dictum) that Augustine was saying: the church has authority over the sacred scriptures. For Augustine appears to be saying that he was moved to believe the latter by the authority of the former. “I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the catholic church.”<sup>41</sup> This straightforward characterization of this reading is replete throughout Catholic discussion of Augustine. To give one example, in Gabriel Biel’s *A Defence of Apostolic Obedience*, we find that after citing from Ephesians 5, Luke 22, John 14, John 17, and Matthew 28 to establish the authority of the church, Biel simply declared that the church’s assertion of catholic truth “must be believed with the same reverence as though it were stated in Holy Scripture.” Augustine concurred, Biel argued, for Augustine declared he would not have believed the gospel had he not been compelled to by the authority of the church.<sup>42</sup> In fact, this reading seemed sufficiently obvious to some Catholics that they felt comfortable applying it to 16th century Protestants directly. This is what we see with Johannes Cochlaeus, who wrote, specifically identifying Martin Luther as a “new Manichean” but he could have just as easily referred to Calvin:

And just in this way ought Christians to respond now to you, our new Manichaeus, when you say, “Do not believe the Councils, Pontifical fathers, and the Church, but rather believe only the Gospel.” You, Luther, cannot rightly tell us we should believe

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<sup>41</sup> PL 42: 176; NPNF 1-4: 131.

<sup>42</sup> Gabriel Biel, *Defensorium Obedientiae Apostolicae et alia Documenta*, ed. Heiko Oberman (Cambridge, MA: 1968), 74-75 cited in Pelikan, *Tradition*, 4: 125.



the Gospel, for it was at the command of the Councils, Pontifical fathers, and the Church that we believe it.<sup>43</sup>

So how did Calvin understand this Augustinian declaration and what does his response tell us about his understanding of the Church? Briefly setting his approach in context, we find the following. Luther, in his 1522 *That Human Doctrines are to be Avoided*, confronted this dictum. He said Augustine had been wrong before and so maybe Christians need not listen to him. He also said if the Catholic's interpretation were correct, then Augustine<sup>44</sup> contradicted himself since he had criticized decrees of church councils by means of Scripture. He stated the Roman See were wrong to apply Augustine's dictum to themselves. And finally, he said Augustine's words merely represented an external proof of faith employed to refute the Manichees.<sup>45</sup> Other Protestant and evangelical theologians concurred with Luther on the basic point that Augustine was not placing church authority above scriptural authority, and generally reiterated Luther's final point. Luther's protégé, Philip Melanchthon, noted Augustine's intention to testify to the church's witness and attestation of the truth handed down by the apostles over against the new doctrine asserted by Mani.<sup>46</sup> For William Tyndale,

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<sup>43</sup> Johannes Cochlaeus, *De Auctoritate Ecclesiae et Scripturae: libri 2 adversus Lutheranos* (Strasbourg: 1524), book I, chapter 7.

<sup>44</sup> WA 10.ii: 89. Luther, 1522 *Von Menschenlehre zu meide*.

<sup>45</sup> WA 10.ii: 89. For more, see Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Traditio in de Reformatie en het Katholicisme in de zestiende Eeuw* (Amsterdam: 1952) cited in Heiko Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology; Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, NC: 1983), 361-71, esp. 370.

<sup>46</sup> Philip Melanchthon, *De Ecclesiae Auctoritate...* (Augustae: 1540), A5.

this witness was the godly life of the Christian, which moved Augustine to realize the gospel was not a vain, empty doctrine but was, in fact, the truth itself.<sup>47</sup> And the Zurichers, Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, argued against the Roman Catholic claim of supreme ecclesial authority, insisting that Augustine's intention was to point to the instrumentality of the church.<sup>48</sup>

Calvin discussed the meaning of Augustine's dictum in *Institutes* 1.7, as part of his defence of religious knowledge. There he contended that Augustine only meant to refer to the church as an instrumental cause. Calvin insisted the efficient cause of Augustine believing the gospel was the Holy Spirit<sup>49</sup> and, moreover, the church father was not asserting that the church's authority is *prior* to that of scripture. In Calvin's reading, we find a relatively rigorous attempt to engage in serious analysis of Augustine's corpus. Calvin ends up citing a fairly-long portion of *Against the Letter of Manichaeus*. He also cited other works,

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<sup>47</sup> William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue, The Supper of the Lord ... and Wm. Tracy's Testament Expounded*, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge: 1850), 49-50.

<sup>48</sup> Zwingli, *Apologeticus archeteles ad pellatus...quem Capitulum vocant misse* (Zurich: 1522), n.p.; Melancthon, *De Ecclesiae Auctoritate* (Augustae: 1540), A5; Heinrich Bullinger, *Compendium christianae religionis decem libris comprehensum...* (Zurich: 1569), 1.4; id., *Sermonum Decades quinque...* (Zurich: 1552), Decade 5, sermon 2.

<sup>49</sup> CO 2: 57 (Inst. 1.7.3); Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci Communes in usus S. Theologiae Candidatorum parati* (Basel: 1560), 229-30.

specifically, portions of Augustine’s *Against Faustus*, *On Order*, and *On the Usefulness of Believing*.<sup>50</sup> On the basis of this evidence, Calvin concluded:

we see [Augustine] wants the certainty of the godly to rest upon a far different foundation” than that the “authority of the church.”<sup>51</sup>

Calvin’s interpretation which sees the Catholic Church as instrumental cause is sufficiently nuanced, it seems to the present author, that it cannot be dismissed out of hand. In actual fact, though, the polemical lines were drawn so sharply by this point (i.e. the mid-1500s) that all sides (Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, etc) could be simultaneously praised and accused in their attempts to get Augustine to speak on behalf of their brand of Christianity. They all passed over other difficult Augustinian material. The same selectivity appears in the works of other evangelicals and Protestants: Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon, etc. and later thinkers like Francis Turretin,<sup>52</sup> as well as from other Catholic theologians like Johannes Cochlaeus and

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<sup>50</sup> Most significantly, Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 32.19 (PL 42: 509) cited in Inst. 1.7.3. For more, Luchesius Smits, *Saint Augustin dans l’œuvre de Jean Calvin*, 2 vols. (Assen: 1956–1958).

<sup>51</sup> CO 2: 57 (Inst. 1.7.3).

<sup>52</sup> In fact, Augustine’s corpus presents profoundly-serious problems for everyone—Catholic, Protestant, etc—who wish to understand his view of the church and, in particular, the meaning of his dictum. Even within his *Contra epistolam Manichaei*, he produces statements that seem on the face of it to support the Roman Catholic reading (such as *Contra epistolam Manichaei* 4:5). Augustine, *Contra epistolam Manichaei* 4:5 (PL 42:606).

Johan Eck—all of which exposes the problem sixteenth-century theologians had in using Augustine on a locus as complex as ecclesiology.

But whether Calvin's reading was nuanced, or not, the point that is worth underlining here concerning his reading of Augustine is deeper than simply how he happens to read the great church father. It is, rather, that Calvin understands the church to have been given birth to by the sacred scriptures. Calvin explains this (he does not enter into discussion of this in expected places such as his commentary on Ephesians 2:20 or 1 Tim 3:15) in *On the True Method of Reforming the Church*. After acknowledging "the proper office of the Church to distinguish genuine from spurious scriptures," he explains what he believed was happening when the church established the canon:

... the church obediently embraces whatever is of God. The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd and will not listen to the voice of strangers.

Thus, the establishment of the canon, according to Calvin, was nothing but true believers listening to their shepherd. Turning, then, to discuss the Roman Catholic understanding according to which priority is ascribed to the Church, he decries it:

But to submit the sound oracles of God to the Church that they may obtain a kind of precarious authority among men, is blasphemous impiety. The Church, as Paul declares, is founded on the doctrine of Apostles and Prophets; but these men speak as if they imagined that the mother owed her birth to the daughter.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> CO 7: 612-13; *Tracts & Letters* 3: 266-67. Johannes Eck, *Enchiridion locorum communium adversus Lutteranos* (Landshut: 1525), "de Ecclesia et autoritate." N.B. Luther

Thus, the scriptures—which Calvin insists are simply God speaking—give birth to the church as a mother her daughter. Calvin, then, held that the temporal priority of the Christian church (and any presumed connection between it and the Roman Catholic Church) was of no consequence in determining issues of authority.

This allows us to turn back to his assertion with which we opened this chapter.

We are in search of the Church of God.<sup>54</sup>

Strengthened by our reading of Calvin’s assault on Rome’s claims to authority, we may now glean more sharply the character of his thinking. First, he is assuming that the church of God are those who listen to their shepherd speaking in the Bible; that that is the only definition of the church of God that he deems appropriate in the conducting of such a search. Second, he takes for granted, therefore, that the church is not “tied to persons” (as he said); that its identity cannot be ascertained simply by looking to those who claim the title, even if their claim is one that appears to have antiquity behind it and even if their claim is that they were founded by John, James, and Peter, the last being the first Pope. None of this is in any way conclusive. Third, Calvin is mindful that throughout history the true Church of God have, at times, been distinct from those who call themselves the Church. The distinction, moreover, is one which Calvin regards as implied in the Pauline prophecy found in 2 Thes 2: 3. This is the prophecy about the “man of sin,” which was taken at this time to be the Anti-Christ who was,

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acknowledged, at least in one place, that the church existed historically prior to the apostolic writings, see WA 2: 561

<sup>54</sup> CO 7: 612.

as we briefly stated earlier, identified as the Pope and Roman Catholic Church. Thus, though he does not comment on Anti-Christ at this time, it is behind his citing of this Pauline prophecy. And fourth, he regards those who listen to their shepherd speaking in the Bible as identifiable by the two marks of gospel-preaching and right administering of the sacraments.

It should, then, be clear that in Calvin's judgment he regards historical lineage (as claimed by the Roman Catholics) as a red herring. It has never been God's intention, he contends, to tie the Church to such a lineage. Thus, for Calvin the charge of schism is fundamentally different from what was understood by the majority of Roman Catholic theologians who accused him and the Genevan pastors of it. As regards the navigating of our search for the Church of God, Calvin proposes that it is actually not difficult—and here too towards finding the true Church of God and distinguishing it from those who merely claim to be the Church, Calvin believes the method is not complicated.

The knowledge of the Church must therefore be sought elsewhere than from the titles of men; and in vain do we go round searching for it while the truest method spontaneously presents itself. Who of us, to recognise a man, would look at his shoes or his feet? Why then, in surveying the Church, do we not begin at its head, seeing that Christ himself invites us to do so?<sup>55</sup>

So for Calvin it does not seem odd at all to query the legitimacy of the large body controlling European Christendom. The remedy, he further adds, for any confusion regarding how to find the church is a simple and elegant one, namely, look to its head; that is, look to Christ who speaks in sacred scripture.

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<sup>55</sup> CO 7: 613; *Tracts & Letters* 3: 267.

*The Genevan Church, Councils and Creeds*

Drawing the chapter to a close, we might comment briefly on the Genevan Church's relationship to and attitude towards the ecumenical councils and creeds. An enormous and complex issue, we will have only a few words to say about it and will leave aside the question of the Genevans' use, and appreciation, of the Church Fathers.<sup>56</sup>

Like many evangelicals/Protestants in Europe at this time, Geneva produced her own catechism (1538 revised 1545) and her own *Confession of Faith* (1536).<sup>57</sup> Again, like many of her contemporaries, the confession Geneva produced—written by Farel and Calvin—followed the lineaments of the historic creeds (Apostles, Nicean, Nicaea-Constantinopolitan, Chalcedonian, Athanasian) with an addition of robust soteriology and polemical material on the sacraments. All citizens and inhabitants of Geneva were required by law to swear to abide by and uphold the Genevan Confession.

Calvin frequently fought with Catholic polemicists, as they accused him and the evangelicals of diverging from the ecumenical creeds and councils. He sought to explain to these opponents the levels of authority which he and the Genevans believed applied to church councils and the statements they produce and to sacred scripture. He insisted, for instance, in his letter to Cardinal Sadoletto that they ascribe to “councils and fathers such rank and honor

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<sup>56</sup> On which, see chapters Johannes van Oort, “John Calvin and the Church Fathers,” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West; from the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus, 2 vols. (Leiden: 1997), 2: 661-700; Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin; Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: 1999).

<sup>57</sup> See, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Louisville, KY: 2003), 117-26.

as it is meet for them to hold, under Christ.”<sup>58</sup> This rank and honor did not, however, make them immune from criticism. He criticized creeds and councils, as one can find, for instance, in *Institutes* 4.9.14, where he goes on the offensive attacking Rome for granting too much authority to councils. He is particularly critical of their claim that “the power of interpreting Scripture belongs to councils,”<sup>59</sup> and is without appeal. Unsurprisingly, he then mentions a litany of common complaints—purgatory, intercession of saints, auricular confession, and suchlike. In his judgment it is precisely on matters such as these that councils expose themselves as open to error.

While all this may seem dull and straightforward, there is more that is not. The curiosity associated with the Genevan pastors’ attitude toward creeds in particular may be introduced by means of recounting a rather odd encounter between some of the Genevans—specifically Guillaume Farel, Calvin, and Pierre Viret—and a man named Pierre Caroli. Caroli was born (ca. 1480) in Rozay-en-Brie and studied at the Collège of Bourgogne. A budding evangelical, he began to associate with the Meaux Circle, a group of humanists, which included *inter alia* Guillaume Briçonnet, the bishop of Meaux, Jacques Faber Stapulensis, Gérard Roussel, François Vatable, and Guillaume Farel. Moving to the Sorbonne, he taught theology in the 1520s but began to attract trouble to himself—a habit that would characterize his life. He was associated by the French authorities with the Affair

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<sup>58</sup> CO 5: 403.

<sup>59</sup> CO 2: 866; for more, see James R. Payton Jr., “Calvin and the Legitimation of Icons: His Treatment of the Seventh Ecumenical Council,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 84 (1993), 222–241.



of the Placards,<sup>60</sup> and so fled to Geneva. Arriving in 1535, he became reacquainted with Farel (Caroli now apparently claiming to be a devotee of the Reformation). He moved to Lausanne and ended up becoming embroiled in another conflict. This concerned prayers for the dead, which he advocated in a sermon.

It is in the conflicts that arose from this issue that the ecumenical creeds become an issue. When Caroli was encouraged to abandon prayer for the dead, he countered by accusing Farel, Viret, and Calvin of Arianism. The three denied his charge, but during the synod that had been called to deal with Caroli, he accused Farel and Calvin of Sabellianism. Caroli was eventually deposed and fled Bernese territory. But during the synod, Calvin gave an address which was later published as *Confession of the Trinity against the Calumnies of P. Caroli*.<sup>61</sup> It was in many ways an unambiguous demonstration of Calvin's adherence to Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy, but had the curious quality of not employing the terms *trinitas* or *persona*. Calvin had, in the first (1536) edition of *Institutes* hinted at having some misgivings about using the word *trinitas* since it is not found in scripture. In other pronouncements, Calvin explained his unwillingness to make subscription to the three ecumenical creeds obligatory; i.e. the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds. Calvin explained that it represented a kind of tyranny, which he felt was wrong to enforce. This insistence on what might appear a slightly eccentric position would not be without its repercussions, and so

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<sup>60</sup> The Affair of the Placards was an incident which occurred the night of 17 October 1543 in which placards denouncing the Roman Catholic understanding of the Lord's Supper appeared throughout Paris and the surrounding area.

<sup>61</sup> See CO 9: 703-710 (*Confessio de Trinitate propter Calumnias P. Caroli*). For more on much of this, see Gary Jenkins, *Calvin's Tormentors: Understanding the Conflicts That Shaped the Reformer* (Grand Rapids: 2018).

Calvin and Farel would continue to be troubled by the lingering suspicion that they were less-than-reliable Trinitarians.

But there was more. By 1540, Caroli had returned to the Roman Catholic Church. Living in nearby Metz, Caroli challenged, or perhaps simply offered, Farel to a debate about the Trinity. No debate ever transpired. But in 1545, Caroli published his *Refutatio* which was responded to a few months later by Calvin's *In Defence of G. Farel and his Colleagues* (*Pro G. Farellio et collegis ejus*). Caroli's text attacked Farel, Calvin, and Viret for things like eschewing the proper vocabulary of Catholic Christianity and the creeds. Curiously, Calvin chose to have his reply published under the name of Nicholas Des Gallars, the minister and amanuensis of Calvin, apparently in an attempt to strengthen the appearance of objectivity. But instead of settling matters, Calvin's *Pro G. Farellio* left the cloud of suspicion hanging over his, Farel, and Viret's heads vis-à-vis their adherence to western Trinitarian orthodoxy as articulated in the major Christian creeds.<sup>62</sup>

The episode represents a fascinating aspect of Geneva's relationship with the common confessional statements of western Christendom. What is equally fascinating is that Geneva required all those living in Geneva to swear to uphold Calvin and Farel's confession while

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<sup>62</sup> See the new edition: *Opera omnia, Series IV Scripta didactica et polemica, volumen VI: Pro G. Farellio et collegis ejus, adversus Petri Caroli theologastri calumnias, defensio Nicolai Gallasii / Refutatio blasphemiae Farellistarum in sacrosanctam Trinitatem*, ed. Olivier Labarthe, with Reinhard Bodenmann (Droz: 2016). All of this is explained in the notes for this Droz volume. Detailed discussion of these affairs, of Calvin and Caroli, the theological issues they both address in their writings, and the history of the period are all provided.

believing (apparently) that it would be a form of tyranny to require them to uphold the Nicene creed.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has examined Geneva's understanding of the church, looking specifically at the issue of schism. This approach was adopted because of the extraordinarily significant place the question of schism holds in the establishment and existence of the Genevan Church. The foundation laid, on the matter of schism, by Calvin was built upon subsequently by Beza (and eventually Benedict Pictet and others), with the anticipation that the separation brought about by the Reformation would not be healed again.